

Workplace Bullying and Stress within the Prison Service

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Purpose: Consequences of workplace bullying include increased stress, poor physical and psychological health and low job satisfaction. Workplace bullying is particularly prevalent in professions that may involve a degree of aggression. Despite this, little information exists about the nature of workplace bullying in a prison context. The current study aims to investigate the presence of workplace bullying at one British prison.

Design: Employees ($n = 72$) were invited to complete the Work Harassment Scale and the Work Stress Symptom Scale.

Findings: A standard multiple regression, revealed that direct experience of bullying significantly predicted stress. Factor analyses identified four types of bullying experienced and three types of bullying witnessed by prison employees. Subsequent analyses revealed that experiencing one specific bullying behavior (i.e. dismissive of individual and their work) predicted physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms of stress. Witnessing one form of bullying (i.e. dismissive, personal attack and threats) also predicted the physical and psychological symptoms of stress.

Limitations: The study is reliant on self-reported data and employs a relatively small sample.

Practical implications: Dismissive behavior in particular is associated with employee stress. Interventions should prioritize this type of workplace bullying.

Value: Few studies have considered the nature of workplace bullying in a prison context. The current study details the prevalence of bullying amongst prison employees, the extent to which bullying impacts on employee stress and the components of bullying that may be most harmful.

Keywords: bullying, prison service, stress, United Kingdom, wellbeing

Introduction

Definitions of bullying and classification criteria vary considerably within the literature (Saunders, et al. 2007). The term workplace bullying has been employed, predominantly by researchers in Europe, Australia and to some extent North America, to describe the intimidation and harassment that occurs within the workplace. Alternate, terms such as mobbing or emotional abuse, have also been used (Keashly, 2001; Leymann, 1990). Whilst most definitions suggest that repetition of bullying is important, there is no agreement on the frequency and duration of bullying required (Cowie, et al. 2001). In addition, other researchers suggest that bullying can occur with a single act (Randall, 1997) and the negative impact of single acts has been noted (Lee, 2000).

Workplace bullying is widespread with 35% to 50% of American employees reporting being the target of bullying at some stage during their working life (Lutgen-Sandvik, et al. 2007). Bullying is, however, under-reported (Bjorkqvist, et al. 1994; Namie, 2007) and research may therefore underestimate the level of workplace bullying that occurs (Salin, 2001). Physical bullying is rarely reported within the workplace (Einarsen, et al. 1994), with covert forms of bullying more frequent (Baron and Neuman, 1998). Bullying behavior may also intensify over time, particularly if the initial behaviors are unchallenged (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). According to Bjorkqvist (1992 p13 in Einarsen, et al. 2003), “during the early phases of the bullying process, victims are typically subjected to aggressive behavior that is difficult to pin down because of its indirect and discrete nature. Later on more aggressive acts appear”. The range of bullying behaviors that exist and the fact that some behavior is experienced more frequently than others (Baron and Neuman, 1998), nevertheless highlights the need to assess a wide range of bullying behaviors.

Workplace bullying has considerable impact on both the individual employee and the host organization. A number of physical and psychological conditions are more prevalent amongst victims of bullying (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003). Bullying also causes more long term illness and trauma than all other types of work oriented stress (Wilson, 1991). Consequently, medically related absence rates for victims of bullying are 1.2 times higher than for other employees (Kivimaki, et al. 2000). Anxiety and depression are amongst the most frequently reported conditions (Niedhammer et al. 2006; Quine, 2001).

Highlighting the long term impact of workplace bullying on victimized employees, Lillemor, et al. (2006) describe the way in which individuals report being “marked for life”. Indeed Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002) state that 80.5% of employees claim that “no other event in their life affected them more negatively than the bullying” (p98). Further emphasizing the severity of this behavior, research has highlighted the impact of bullying in suicidal ideation (Leymann, 1990) and attempts (O’Moore et al. 1998); according to Leymann (1992) one in seven adult suicides are attributable to workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is therefore an acknowledged workplace risk (Health and Safety Executive, 1995).

For the employer, the consequences of workplace bullying may include reduced motivation, job satisfaction, performance and productivity of the bullied employee (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Kivimaki, et al. 2000; Leymann, 1990; Porto Serantes and Arana Suarez, 2006). Intentions to leave the organization, absenteeism and resignations are also increased among victims of bullying (Namie, 2003; Rayner, et al. 2002; Quine, 1999), which decreases the effectiveness of the employee base and increases the demands placed on non bullied employees. Of particular relevance for some organizations, is the nervousness, lack of confidence and social withdrawal reported by the victims of bullying (Brodsky, 1976; Gillen,

et al. 2008; Spratlen, 1995) which may impact on their effectiveness, including their ability to instruct or hold the respect of others.

Understandably the majority of research in this area has focused on the health and wellbeing of the victimized employee. In recent years, there has been an increased awareness of the extent to which *witnesses* of workplace bullying and employees that are not directly involved may also be affected (Lutgen-Sandvik, et al. 2007; Vartia, 2001). Witnesses of workplace bullying can be described as “employees who themselves were not violated but whose perceptions, fears and expectations are changed as a result of being vicariously exposed to violence” (Barling, 1996, p35). It has been suggested that witnesses of workplace bullying may be affected by the bullying behavior almost as severely as the victim (Mayhew, et al. 2004). In addition to the stress, anxiety, and ill health that may occur (Hansen, et al. 2006; Rayner, 1999), witnesses of workplace bullying also report decreased job satisfaction, productivity, commitment and loyalty to the organization (Hoel and Cooper, 2000). Therefore, those investigating this area should consider the impact of both direct experience of bullying and witnessing this behavior.

The importance of context and organizational culture should not be underestimated. In particular, the prison environment is one that may present a number of unique challenges, due to its masculine, aggressive culture and the routine aspects of dealing with a challenging client group (e.g. offenders). These factors may impact on the likelihood of workplace bullying, the manner in which employees respond or cope with the bullying, and the non bullying degree of employee stress and ill health. Investigating bullying at over 70 organizations, Hoel and Cooper (2000) found bullying between staff to be particularly prevalent in a number of environments, including the prison service. It was evident from their study that within the previous five years, 64% of staff had witnessed bullying and over 31% had experienced bullying. This is consistent with research highlighting the increased

prevalence of bullying in professions that involve an element of aggression, such as law enforcement and containment (Hoel and Salin, 2003).

Previous research has described the prison service organizational culture. Woodcraft (2001 p43) quotes HM Prison Service Staff Care and Welfare Service by stating, “The Prison Service Environment is one in which aggression and violence are part of a scene. It is not surprising therefore that this can affect the way a small minority of staff relate to their own colleagues”. There may also be a perception that there is no room for ‘wimps’ within the prison service (Hua-Fu, 2005) and staff may feel they are perceived as those who should be able to deal with negativity from other staff, given the challenging environment in which they work (Bennett, et al. 2008). At present limited research has examined workplace bullying within prison organizations, although there is evidence that workplace bullying impacts on stress, mental health, and job satisfaction in prison employees (Vartia and Hyyti, 2002).

The current study investigates the presence of workplace bullying at one British prison. The current study adopts an inclusive approach in which repetition is not required. In this context, bullying can be conceptualized as “harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks” (Einarsen, et al. 2003 p 15). The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, with participants completing a questionnaire that contained both closed and open-ended questions. It was predicted that bullied employees and those that witness workplace bullying would report greater levels of stress than employees that did not experience or witness bullying. Due to the common reluctance to report workplace bullying (Rayner, et al. 2002), researchers also predicted that employees would be unwilling to engage with existing policy.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Following approval from the Prison Governor and the University Ethics Committee, a questionnaire was piloted with a small number of prison service staff. Following minor amendments (e.g. wording) all employees, operational and non operational, based at one British prison housing male offenders were invited to take part in the study. Of these, 72 (42 men, 28 women and two unspecified) completed and returned the entire questionnaire, which contained both closed and open-ended questions. Most participants were aged over 35 years. As participants were required to supply potentially identifiable personal information (e.g. gender, role), age range rather than specific age was provided in order to retain participant anonymity.

Materials

The questionnaire contained a number of autobiographical questions (e.g. age range, sex, current role). The Work Harassment Scale (Bjorkqvist, et al. 1992) was also included. This assessed the prevalence and type of bullying behaviors experienced and witnessed by participants, with '0' indicating 'never' and '4' indicating 'very often' during the previous six months. The scale contained 24 items (Cronbach's alpha: experienced .95; witnessed .97). Example items included 'lies about you told to others' and 'refusal to speak with you'. Where appropriate, participants were asked to provide further information about the bullying such as the role of the perpetrator.

The Work Stress Symptom Scale (Bjorkqvist and Osterman, 1992) was also used. This originally contained ten items, however, for the purpose of the current study three further questions were added in order to address issues concerning relationships with

prisoners and colleagues, and effects on absenteeism (Cronbach's alpha: .96). Experience of specific symptoms such as 'exhaustion' and 'depression' were rated on a scale of 0–4, with '0' indicating 'never' and '4' indicating 'very often'.

Finally, participants were encouraged to answer open ended questions relating to their knowledge and confidence in the current provision and system for reporting workplace bullying. Example items included 'If you are aware of procedures but have not / would not follow them, please state why not'.

Results

Data were analyzed to reveal the prevalence of workplace bullying, the impact of bullying on employee stress, the impact of specific components of bullying and employee experience / perceptions of bullying policy.

Prevalence of Bullying

Participants reported substantial levels of workplace bullying. Specifically, 79% (Men: 79%, Women: 79%) of employees reported experiencing bullying behavior at least once and 69% (Men: 75%, Women: 64%) reported they had witnessed bullying behavior at least once during the previous six months. Overall, 67% (Men: 71%, Women: 62%) of staff reported that they had both experienced and witnessed workplace bullying within this timeframe. Staff believed to perpetrate bullying were more likely to be men (61%) and between the ages of 36 and 45 years old (44%). Participants that had experienced workplace bullying revealed that Senior Officers, Operational Managers, and Non Operational Managers were most responsible for these (46%).

Bullying and Stress

The highest levels of stress were reported by staff that had both experienced and witnessed workplace bullying ($M = 18.2$, $SD = 13.5$), followed by those that had either experienced ($M = 11.1$, $SD = 9.4$) or witnessed ($M = 8.5$, $SD = 10.6$) bullying only. Consistent with initial predictions, employees that had not personally experienced or witnessed workplace bullying in the previous six months reported the lowest levels of stress ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 6.9$). A one-way between subjects ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in reported stress for the four bullying groups ($F(3,61) = 3.6$, $p < .05$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that employees that had both experienced and witnessed workplace bullying reported significantly higher levels of stress ($MD = 12.6$, $p < .05$) than those that did not experience or witness bullying. All other differences were non significant.

A standard multiple regression was conducted to assess the extent to which experiencing or witnessing bullying within the workplace predicted stress. The model significantly predicted stress ($F(2,59) = 38.7$, $p < .001$), explaining 56.7% of the variance. Experiencing bullying was the only significant individual predictor ($B = .71$, $p < .001$).

Types of Bullying and Stress Reported

Factor analyses were conducted in order to identify the different types of bullying behaviors experienced and witnessed by participants, and the different forms of stress that occurred. The items contained within the experienced scale which are part of the Work Harassment Scale were first subjected to principle components analysis. The correlation matrix demonstrated that many of the coefficients were .3 and above and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value exceeded that which is recommended (value = .75). The Bartlett's test of Sphericity also reached statistical significance. The principle components analysis revealed

the presence of four components, with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 51.4%, 9.6%, 6.6% and 5.4% of the variance respectively. Inspection of the scree plot and Horn's Parallel Analysis (1965), using the software developed by Watkins (2000), supported retention of these factors. As shown in Table 1, these components were *Dismissive of individual and their work*, *Personal insults and attack*, *Criticism of mental health* and *Direct threats*.

The second factor analysis was conducted on the items detailing witnessing bullying behaviors which are part of the Work Harassment Scale. A principle components analysis was applied and the correlation matrix demonstrated that many of the coefficients were .3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value exceeded that which is recommended (value = .78) and the Bartlett's test of Sphericity also reached statistical significance. The principle components analysis revealed three components, with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 59.9%, 6.4%, and 5.6% of the variance respectively. The three components explained a total of 72.9% of the overall variance. Inspection of the scree plot and Horn's Parallel Analysis (1965) supported retention of these factors. Oblimin rotation was performed to assist with the interpretation of the components. As shown in Table 1, the components produced by the factor analysis were *Dismissive, personal attack and threats*, *Personal attack and accusations* and *Disruptive of work*.

Items contributing to the Work Stress Symptom Scale were then subjected to principle components analysis. The correlation matrix demonstrated that many of the coefficients were .3 and above and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was supportive of factor analysis (value = .91). Bartlett's test of Sphericity also reached statistical significance. The principle components analysis revealed the two components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 65.8% and 9% of the variance respectively. The two components explained a total of 74.8% of the variance. Inspection of the scree plot and Horn's Parallel Analysis supported retention of these factors. Oblimin rotation was used as factors were expected to correlate. As shown in

Table 1, these components were *Physical and psychological symptoms* and *Behavioral symptoms*.

Predicting Stress from Bullying Components

Standard multiple regressions were conducted to investigate the impact of experiencing and witnessing specific bullying types on both components of stress, i.e. physical / psychological symptoms, and behavioral symptoms. As shown in Table 2, the four categories of experiencing (i.e. *Dismissive of individual and their work*; *Personal insults and attack*; *Criticism of mental health*; *Direct threats*) and three categories of witnessing bullying (i.e. *Dismissive, personal attack and threats*; *Personal attack and accusations*; *Disruptive of work*) significantly predicted the physical and psychological symptoms of stress together explaining 68.8% of the physical and psychological symptom variance. One type of experiencing, namely *dismissive of individual and their work*, and one form of witnessing, namely *dismissive, personal attack and threats*, of bullying were significant individual predictors of stress.

As shown in Table 2, these categories of experiencing and witnessing bullying also significantly predicted the behavioral symptoms of stress. Together they explained 48.6% of the physical and psychological symptom variance. One type of experiencing bullying, *dismissive of individual and their work*, significantly predicted stress. In each instance, greater direct experience of bullying or witnessing bullying related to greater symptomology.

Qualitative Information

In addition to reporting actual bullying behaviors, participants were also encouraged to comment on their knowledge and experience of current procedures that should be followed

when experiencing or witnessing bullying behavior. Participants were also encouraged to express their views about how working together can be improved at the establishment.

Of the 72 participants, 50 reported that they were aware of the current procedures for addressing workplace bullying. Consistent with predictions, 20% (10), namely a substantial proportion that reportedly understood the current procedure reported that they would not follow protocol due to potential negative consequences. For example, *“people tend to back their managers and nothing gets done”*, *“it is better to keep the peace”* and *“I would be afraid of being victimised”*. In addition, eight employees that had reported an incident were not satisfied with the outcome whilst five were satisfied. One individual identified both positive and negative experiences. Example comments include *“they were not followed correctly/not dealt with”*, *“things tend to get brushed under the carpet”* and *“I was told that I had a problem”*. A number (9%) of participants suggested areas that could be improved, typically focusing on communication *“communications between staff need to be more frequent and reliable”*, and a greater understanding of the roles filled by each member of staff i.e. *“learning others roles and look at the responsibilities involved in it could help”*.

Discussion

A substantial number of prison employees reported experiencing or witnessing workplace bullying during the previous six months, consistent with research conducted in other sectors (Lutgen-Sandvik, et al. 2007). Prevalence of workplace bullying was considerably higher than in previous prison based research (Vartia and Hyyti, 2002) that defined bullying as ‘enduring and repetitive’ (p117). Participants that had both experienced and witnessed workplace bullying reported the highest levels of stress, followed by employees that had either witnessed or experienced bullying alone. As predicted, comparatively low levels of stress were reported by participants that had not experienced nor

witnessed workplace bullying, during this time frame. Overall experience of workplace bullying (i.e. direct victimization) predicted employee stress. When the types of bullying experienced and witnessed were analyzed further, one type of bullying behavior experienced, namely being dismissive of an individual and their work predicted the physical and psychological symptoms of stress and the behavioral symptoms associated with stress. This finding supports previous research documenting the impact of indirect bullying on a victim's health and wellbeing (Brewer, 2010). Witnessing dismissive, personal attack and threats also predicted the physical and psychological symptoms of stress reported.

The current study extends previous research (Hoel and Cooper, 2000; Vartia and Hyyti, 2002) documenting the prevalence of workplace bullying within a prison environment and highlights the manner in which experiencing and witnessing different types of bullying may impact on employee stress. Specifically, the findings suggest that dismissive behavior negatively impacts on employee wellbeing and subsequent interventions should address this behavior in particular. The research also provides further support for the assertion that workplace bullying impacts on stress and wellbeing (Di Rosa et al. 2009; Quine, 2001).

The finding that Senior Officers and Management staff members were perceived to be primarily responsible for the workplace bullying experienced is consistent with previous research (Namie, 2007) and the fact that the bully is often of a higher status than the victim (Rayner, 1997). According to Niedl (1996) the difference in 'power' between those involved is a key feature of the bullying experience and affects whether the employee feels able to successfully defend themselves. Of course, this perception may also reflect the legitimate institutional hierarchy that exists within the prison service. Consistent with other organizations, the prison in which the current study was conducted had organizational procedure and policy in place in order to address workplace bullying. Whilst a considerable number of participants successfully identified how to deal with bullying (either direct

experience or witnessing), a number of participants have not, or would not, follow these procedures due to perceived negative consequences. This is consistent with predictions made concerning disengagement with the existing bullying policy and previous research documenting the potential reasons why employees may not report workplace bullying (Leymann, 1996; Niedl, 1996).

Previous research has also indicated that a considerable number of employees that try to take appropriate action when faced with bullying are dissatisfied with the outcome (Quine, 1999). This together with the findings of the current study, suggests that for those designing interventions to address workplace bullying, raising the awareness of bullying and available procedures may not be of primary importance. Rather, services should also investigate the barriers to reporting workplace bullying. Furthermore, regular monitoring of the grievance process, including the opportunity for employees to provide feedback about the procedure and their satisfaction with the results is required. These audits may be particularly important when assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

The current study describes the extent to which bullying predicts stress, suggesting that stress may increase susceptibility to poor mental and physical health. This is consistent with previous suggestions (Keashly, et al. 1997), namely that mental and physical health problems result from exposure to negative behavior and bullying. It is also possible that health problems or physical condition may make a person vulnerable to workplace bullying. For example a female employee that is removed from operational duty when pregnant may be vulnerable to bullying from those who absorb these operational responsibilities. According to Kivimaki, et al. 2000, p659) “The process of bullying may include characteristics of the vicious circle in which poor health is a result of bullying and a factor increasing susceptibility to becoming a victim of bullying”. Longitudinal research is however required to establish the causality of this relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

The current findings should be interpreted with caution. The study is reliant on self report data and characteristic of questionnaire based research, the response rate for the current study was low. This may in part reflect employee fears of negative repercussions and thus those participating may not be representative of prison service employees. The use of self report questionnaires may, however, under rather than over estimate the level of workplace bullying (Salin, 2001). This suggests that the current study may not have included the most vulnerable employees.

A wide range of factors may influence the way in which an employee responds to bullying (when either a victim or witness). Non work factors that may impact on the response to bullying include preferred coping style, the availability of social support and personality (Moreno-Jimenez, et al. 2009; Park and DeFrank, 2010). As the bullying experience may influence factors as coping style and behavior (Richman, et al. 2001) and relationships with members of the social support network, further research addressing this issue would be informative.

Future research adopting physiological measures such as the analysis of cortisol concentrations (Hansen, et al. 2011) may clarify the impact of workplace bullying on employee health. Similarly, Cowie, et al. (2002) advocate the use of both inside (e.g. questionnaire, interviews) and outside (e.g. observation and peer nomination) perspectives to measure workplace bullying. Future research employing multiple methodologies will provide the most comprehensive understanding of workplace bullying.

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Table 1: Components Produced by the Factor Analysis

Scale	Component	Number of Items	Example Item	Cronbach's Apha
Experienced Bullying (Work Harassment Scale)	Dismissive of individual and their work	12	Belittling of your opinions	.94
	Personal insults and attack	5	Having malicious rumours spread behind your back	.90
	Criticism of mental health	1	Accusations of being mentally disturbed	
	Direct threats	6	Insinulative glances and/or negative threats	.92
Witnessed Bullying (Work Harassment Scale)	Dismissive, personal attack and threats	10	Insinulative glances and/or negative threats	.95
	Personal attack and accusations	10	Insulting comments about their private life	.95
	Disruptive of work	4	Being unduly disrupted	.87
Work Stress Symptom Scale	Physical and psychological symptoms	9	Insomnia	.95
	Behavioral symptoms	4	Reduced confidence in working with prisoners	.84

Table 2: Regression Models for Symptoms of Stress

Dependent Measure	Model	Total Variance Explained	Significant Predictors	Beta
Physical and Psychological Symptoms	$(F(7, 54) = 17.0, p < .001)$	68.8%	Experienced: Dismissive of individual and their work Witnessed: dismissive, personal attack and threats	$B = .57, p < .001$ $B = .37, p < .001$
Behavioral Symptoms	$(F(7, 55) = 7.4, p < .001)$	48.6%	Experienced: Dismissive of individual and their work	$B = .58, p < .001$